



THE ELEPHANT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

LABOUR'S RURAL PROBLEM

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2020



Contents

- 1 Foreword
- 2 Executive Summary
- 6 Maria Eagle’s key findings
- 12 Labour’s missing rural policy in 2015
- 14 Labour’s still missing rural policy in 2017
- 17 A final push
- 19 Labour’s missed opportunity in the countryside
- 20 General Election 2019 rural analysis
- 24 Labour still going in the wrong direction
- 26 Labour’s opportunity to re-engage with the countryside

- 29 Bibliography

Foreword

When Labour won the 1997 and 2001 general elections it boasted over 100 rural MPs reaching into the Conservative rural heartlands. Constituency boundaries have changed, but that cannot hide the disastrous situation Labour now finds itself in, now with new leadership we have an opportunity to re-engage with the countryside. As this report reveals, Labour now holds just 17 of the 199 seats in England and Wales designated as rural. It is one thing being beaten in the traditional Tory shires, but quite another to see working class rural constituencies like Workington, Penistone and Stockbridge, Bishop Auckland and Sedgefield, which have been Labour for generations, fall to the Tories.

Most worrying is the refusal of the Party to address its rural failure, even after the historic defeat of 2019. Post-election analysis from all parts of the party has completely ignored Labour’s rejection in the countryside. As this report shows blaming Brexit is not an option. Labour MPs and the Fabian Society had identified ‘Labour’s rural problem’ long before Britain’s relationship with the European Union became an electoral issue.

Our report traces Labour’s rural problem since 2015, identifying what went wrong for Labour in rural areas, and what Labour could do to turnaround their rural fortunes. As well as drawing on the seminal research by Maria Eagle MP, the report also considers research from the Fabian Society and polling from ORB International. We hope that this piece of work both offers insight into the rural electorate and also starts a conversation within Labour that helps it re-engage with the countryside. Labour’s rejection by rural communities cannot continue to be the elephant in the countryside. No party can afford to ignore the rural vote if it is serious about forming a government.



Baroness Mallalieu QC
President, Countryside Alliance

Executive Summary

There is an elephant loose in the countryside, but the Labour Party does not seem to want to talk about it. Labour currently holds just 17 of the 199 rural seats in England and Wales. It is, therefore, a matter of simple electoral mathematics to say that if Labour are to have any chance of forming a government it must win over the rural electorate.

This is not a new observation. Maria Eagle, Labour MP for Garston and Halewood, came to the same conclusion in 2015 in her paper – *Labour’s Rural Problem*. Tobias Phibbs of the Fabian Society published a paper, *Labour Country*, following the 2017 general election that also argued that Labour must engage with the rural electorate if it is to have any chance of making the significant gains in rural seats necessary to form a government.¹ However, their warnings were ignored which led to Labour being virtually wiped out in rural constituencies in 2019.

After the 2015 general election the Labour Party held 30 of the 199 rural seats in England and Wales, after the 2017 election it held 32. Now, after the 2019 general election, it holds just 17 rural seats.² Much of the analysis of Labour’s defeat in 2019 has focused on the collapse of the “Red Wall”, but not enough has been said about the fact that so many of the seats it lost were rural. Labour’s rural problem was most starkly illustrated in the Cumbrian constituency of Workington where the Shadow Defra Secretary, Sue Hayman, was defeated in a seat that Labour had won in every general election since the constituency was created in 1918.

Labour’s rural problem, despite being identified many years before, had not been acknowledged. In 2019 Labour recorded its worst ever result in the countryside, but this cannot be attributed to a one-off Brexit election result. The 2019 general election was significant for many reasons, not least the result. However, to view it as an anomaly, as many do, would be to ignore the changes in the electorate that were taking place beforehand. Post-election analysis for *The Political Quarterly* – ‘Brexit,

the 2019 General Election and the Realignment of British Politics’, found ‘that 2019 [was] not a critical election but a continuation of longer-term trends of dealignment and realignment in British politics (Cutts, Goodwin, Heath, Surridge 2020: 2). The analysis revealed that Labour neglected its support in working class Britain in order to ‘expand its support among the liberal, metropolitan middle class’ (Cutts, Goodwin, Heath, Surridge 2020: 2). It was decisions made by the Labour Party in the run-up to the 2019 election, and preceding elections, that led to the Party’s worst result since 1935. Labour’s electoral strategy of trying to appeal to those in cities meant it ignored the rural electorate. Labour’s poor performance in the countryside is the result of the direction of the Labour Party over the past three elections at least, not a one-off Brexit election. If Labour continues to target the same type of support it is unlikely to make significant electoral gains for the simple reason that it already holds most of the seats where that support is (Cutts, Goodwin, Heath, Surridge 2020: 22). The Labour Party must look to the countryside if it is to win the 123 seats required to have any chance of forming a government; and as is clear from the research, as well as the geography, voters in the countryside are not the same as those in cities.

Andrew Harrop of the Fabian Society noted this trend in 2015. Forewarning about the problems in England and Wales in 2015 post-election analysis – *The Mountain to Climb* he reported: ‘If Labour makes no gains in Scotland [in 2020], the Party would need to perform better in England and Wales than at any time since 1997’ (Harrop 2015: 5). Crucial to its performance in England and Wales, even then, were rural seats.

Maria Eagle’s analysis made the same connection and drafted an electoral strategy on how Labour could win seats in the countryside and win the seats needed to form a government. She used the Fabian Society’s 2015 post-election analysis as the foundation to identify Labour’s problem and how it could be resolved.

As we know, the next election was not in 2020, but in 2017. The post-election analysis after the 2017 election was more positive for Labour. After all the Conservatives had lost their majority and instead of the ‘mountain to climb’ it was only ‘a ‘final push’ required to win the seats needed to form the next government. Lewis Baston, also of the Fabian Society, claimed: ‘After 2017 a fairly normal swing will suffice to put Labour in power’ that can be achieved through targeting urban liberals (Baston 2017). However, such analysis misses the crucial point that Labour already held many of the seats which contained a majority of those urban liberals. In reality it should have looked at how it could have captured those rural seats that only needed what was then a ‘fairly normal swing’.

¹ The research was funded by the Countryside Alliance.

² The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs rural urban classification in England and Wales, as defined in 2011, means that of 650 constituencies, 199 are rural (Gov.UK 2016). See Appendix I for full list.

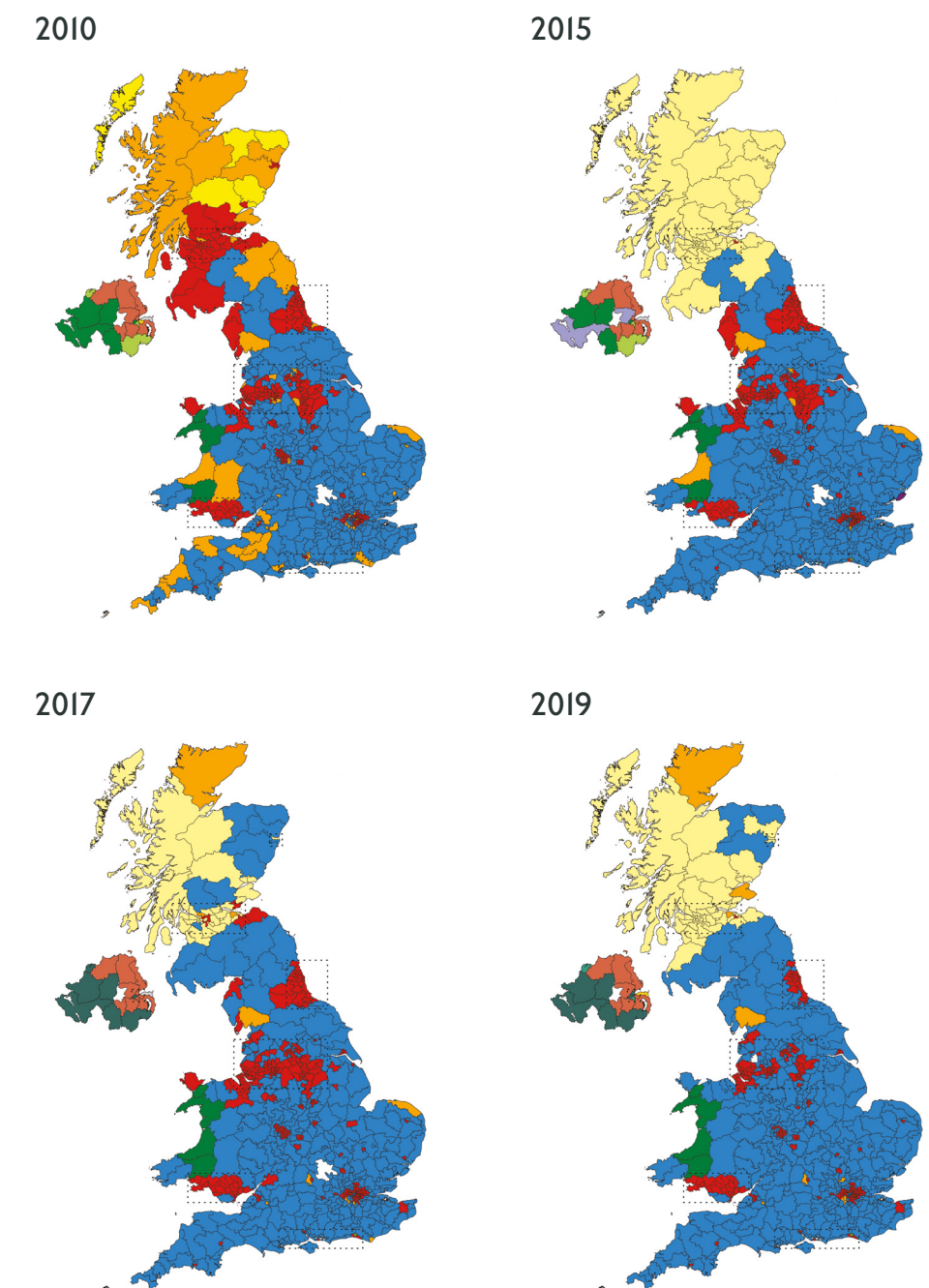
Andrew Harrop’s 2019 post-election analysis for the Fabian Society – *Another Mountain to Climb* – made for a different read. In this report he lays out some hard truths. A return to a Labour majority government at the next election is unlikely, and to have any hope of winning power within 10 years ‘a decisive change in direction is needed’ (Harrop 2019: 2). Labour’s focus needs to shift away from urban metropolitan areas, where it already has so much support, to focus on rural areas where it struggles. To blame the 2019 election result on Brexit would be to ignore Labour’s rural result since 2015 and also the geography of its current seats.

Labour Together also published a forensic examination of why the Labour Party performed so poorly in the 2019 general election. The report found it was a mixture of factors including almost exclusive support for Labour being in cities (Labour Together 2020: 10). However, despite this observation, the report strangely did not explore Labour’s relationship with the countryside. Labour’s failing relationship with the rural electorate cannot be ignored. It only holds 8.5 per cent of rural seats compared to the Conservatives’ 89 per cent. If ever Labour are to get into government, it must challenge the Conservatives’ dominance in the countryside.

This report will examine Labour’s presence in rural seats from 2015 to the present day. We will begin by exploring Maria Eagle’s 2015 report and find that many of the issues she identified have remained throughout each subsequent election. The inability, or perhaps even unwillingness, to resolve those issues has meant that Labour has consistently failed to engage with the rural electorate. We will find that this has created the perception that the Labour Party is an urban party and one that cannot, and currently does not, represent the countryside. We will then use the 199 rural seats as a metric of how effective Labour’s rural strategy was in that period.

Our analysis will conclude by looking at where Labour stands after the 2019 election in terms of seats and the perception of Labour in the countryside, and what Labour needs to do to rectify its rural problem. Simply, Labour needs to engage with the rural electorate and focus on what matters to them, and not simply manipulate rural issues to appeal further to its increasingly urban base. It needs to pursue policies relevant to the countryside and work with stakeholders who represent their interests. Labour cannot continue to ignore the countryside because to do so will spell electoral disaster for the foreseeable future. It must recognise where it has gone wrong with regard to the rural electorate and follow a new path that resets its relationship with them.

Figure 1
The changing politics of the UK



Images: Wikimedia Commons

Maria Eagle’s key findings

Labour’s rural problem in England and Wales only became so apparent in 2015 because Labour lost all but one of their 41 seats in Scotland. The loss of so many seats north of the border provoked much needed analysis south of the border. Maria Eagle carried out this research and found that Labour did not just have a problem in Scotland but also had a significant rural problem in England and Wales. A closer look at the urban/rural divide revealed that the Labour Party only held 30 rural seats out of a possible 199.

The small number of rural seats does not tell the full story of the significance of Labour’s problem. In 2015, the Liberal Democrats went from 57 to eight seats – 17 of these 49 lost seats were rural. The Conservatives won 16 of those rural seats, Labour only managed to gain one. Labour also lost two rural seats to the Conservatives in that election – equating to a net loss of rural seats overall (BBC 2015). The Conservatives also gained the UKIP held Clacton constituency. It is no understatement to say that the countryside delivered the 13 seat Conservative majority, and if Labour could have won some of those Liberal Democrat seats it may have prevented a Conservative majority. It is important to remember that the countryside was not always Conservative, there was a portion of the electorate in many of the rural seats that was Liberal Democrat and there remain rural seats held by Plaid Cymru. The rural electorate is not stuck in its ways, rather it votes for the party it believes best represents its interests, and is less tribal in its political loyalties than many in the Labour Party assume, much to its detriment, as Maria Eagle herself recognised.

Maria Eagle argued that because the countryside is perceived as inherently Conservative the Labour Party pays it no attention: ‘For too many rurality is synonymous with Conservatism, and engaging with these communities is at best an afterthought, and at worst a complete waste of time’ (Eagle 2015: 2). However, the result in 2015 shows that those seats were not a complete waste of time. The Conservative Party only managed to form a majority government because of its strength in rural seats.

As such, the significance of the rural problem cannot be overstated. Rural seats in England and Wales are Labour’s key to No.10, and why the Conservative Party remains there. Maria Eagle reached this conclusion in 2015: ‘We cannot win again without a concerted effort to become at least competitive in these areas’

(Eagle 2015: 2). Along with Maria Eagle’s stark observation, came an action plan:

Developing a coherent vision for the countryside: rural policy development has to fit into a wider vision we want to see and build. The Party should open itself up and engage with stakeholders and relevant groups so that they are part of building the compelling new narrative...

Coming to terms with the ‘rural problem’: rural/urban distinctions are important, and Labour needs to recognise this. It is concerning that some Labour activists in rural areas do not accept the areas they work in are rural (Eagle 2015: 3).

Maria Eagle had identified that there was an urban bias ingrained within Labour – both in its policy and membership. Collectively, from the centre of the Party outwards there was a narrow focus on the urban vote and even a denial of the need to recognise rural constituencies as relevant, or even rural. There was, as a result, a massive disconnect between the Labour Party and rural voters.

Labour’s Rural Problem went on to dissect the issues and broke down what proportion of the countryside Labour held.

The report uses the 2011 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs rural urban classification as below:³

There are three constituency-level rural classifications

Significant rural: constituencies with 33 per cent – 49.9 per cent of the population living in rural settlements and larger market towns.

Rural 50: constituencies with 50 per cent – 74.9 per cent of the population living in rural settlements and larger market towns.

Rural 75: constituencies with at least 75 per cent of the population living in rural settlements and larger market towns.

(gov.uk 2016)

³ For consistency this report will also use these classifications for subsequent elections.

Labour-held seats after 2015 general election

Barrow and Furness	Sig rural
Bassetlaw	Rural 50
Bishop Auckland	Rural 75
Blyth Valley Boro	Rural 50
Bolsover	Rural 50
Chorley	Sig rural
City of Durham	Rural 50
Clwyd South	Sig rural
Copeland	Rural 75
Delyn	Rural 50
Easington	Rural 50
Hemsworth	Rural 50
Llanelli	Sig rural
Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	Sig rural
Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland	Rural 50
Neath	Sig rural
Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford	Sig rural
North Durham	Rural 50
North East Derbyshire	Rural 50
North West Durham	Rural 75
Ogmore	Rural 50
Pontypridd	Sig rural
Sedgefield	Rural 75
Sefton Central	Sig rural
St. Helens North	Sig rural
Wansbeck	Rural 75
West Lancashire	Rural 50
Wirral West	Rural 50
Workington	Rural 75
Ynys Mon	Rural 75

- Labour held 10 of the 56 seats classified as sig rural (18 per cent).
- Labour held 13 of the 41 seats classified as rural 50 (32 per cent).
- Labour held 7 of the 75 seats classified as rural 75 (9 per cent).

(Eagle 2015: 5)

Figure 2
Party representation in rural seats after the 2015 general election

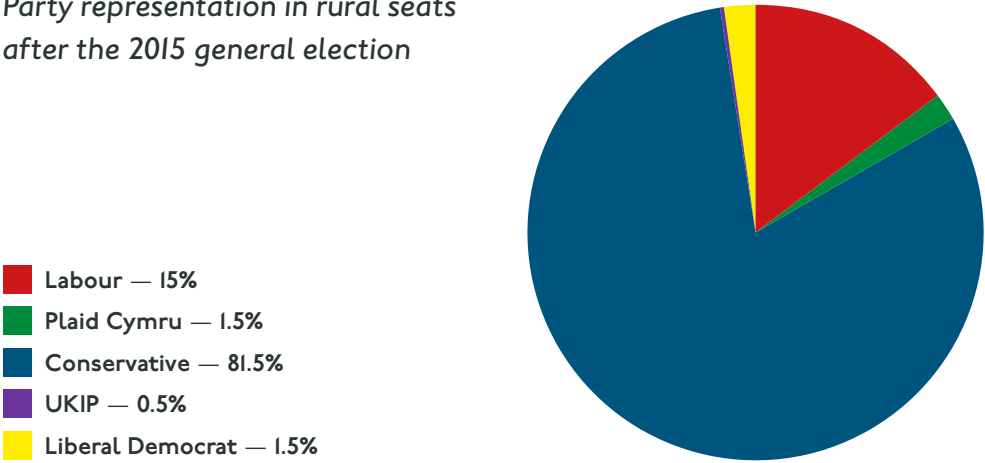


Figure 3
Possible Labour-held rural seats after the 2017 election

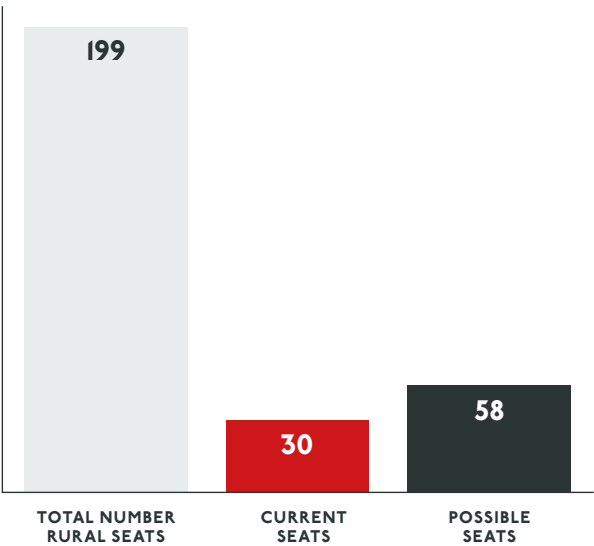
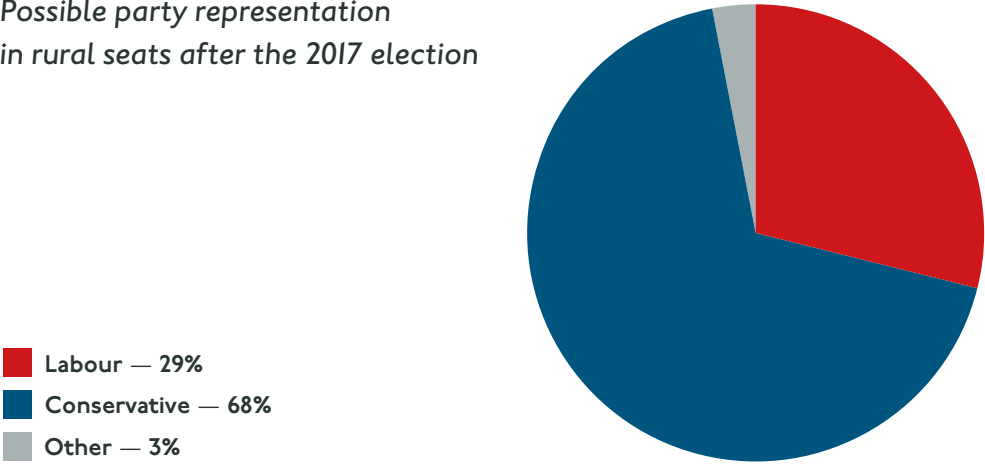


Figure 4
Possible party representation in rural seats after the 2017 election



Labour’s electoral problem was clearly a rural one, as Figure 2 illustrates. Maria Eagle’s research revealed that not only did the Labour Party only have 30 rural seats, but it was losing ground in each of them. The more rural the constituency the less likely it was to vote Labour and, to make matters worse, the Conservative Party held a significant majority in the countryside. After 2015 Labour needed to overcome an average swing of 16.7 per cent in the countryside, well above the 8.7 per cent national swing. Regardless, the only way into government must be to gain rural Conservative seats.

Maria Eagle, using findings from the Fabian Society’s *The Mountain to Climb: Labour’s 2020 Challenge*, identified 28 rural seats that Labour should target that required a swing of less than the 12.4 per cent (Eagle 2015: 7). 19 of the 28 seats were held in 2001, and therefore it was not beyond the realms of possibility for Labour to retake them at the next election.

The electorate in these seats all shared similar characteristics. Maria Eagle argued that in order to engage with these rural seats, and rural England and Wales more generally, Labour must pursue policies that appeal to ‘a rural population which is older, more isolated, relatively poorer with higher levels of employment’ (Eagle 2015: 13). The strategy therefore is simple, pursue policies that matter and appeal to the rural electorate and in doing so Labour will be recognised as a party that understands and can represent rural areas. As Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the rural problem would by no means be solved by the next election, which took place in 2017. Labour would only hold 58 rural seats (29 per cent), thus demonstrating just how much Labour had to do to resolve the imbalance it faces in rural communities.

Labour’s 28 rural target seats as identified in ‘Labour’s Rural Problem’ in 2015

Constituency	Rurality	Required Swing
Aberconwy	Rural 50	6.7
Arfon	Rural 50	6.8
Beverley and Holderness	Rural 75	11.5
Calder Valley	Sig rural	4.1
Camborne and Redruth	Sig Rural	7.6
Cannock Chase	Sig Rural	5.3
Carmarthen East and Dinefwr	Rural 75	7.1
Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	Rural 75	7.5
Cleethorpes	Sig rural	8.8
Corby	Sig rural	2.2
Dover	Rural 50	6.3
Elmet and Rothwell	Rural 50	7.4
Forest of Dean	Rural 75	11.1
Gower	Sig rural	0.1
High Peak	Rural 50	4.9
Keighley	Sig rural	3.1
Monmouth	Rural 50	11.6
North Warwickshire	Rural 50	3.2
North West Leicestershire	Rural 50	11.1
Preseli Pembrokeshire	Rural 50	6.3
Scarborough and Whitby	Sig rural	6.5
Sherwood	Rural 50	4.6
South Derbyshire	Sig rural	11.3
Staffordshire Moorlands	Rural 50	12.0
Stroud	Sig rural	4.0
The Wrekin	Sig rural	11.9
Vale of Clwyd	Sig rural	0.3
York Outer	Sig rural	12.2

(Eagle 2015: 8)

Labour’s missing rural policy in 2015

Labour’s characterisation of rural policies and rural areas has been associated with the activities rural communities take part in, rather than with the issues they experience. As a result, animal welfare, or rather animal rights, has been pursued as Labour’s hallmark rural policy in the last three elections.

Labour’s main underlying problem when it comes to policy, Maria Eagle concluded, is from the disconnect and mischaracterisation of the countryside. By judging the communities on the activities they enjoy, the roles they carry out or even by the perceived social class associated with their livelihoods or activities, national policy was pursued that ignored issues in the countryside completely. A Labour activist provided a scathing account of Labour’s electoral strategy in 2015: “Our national message just did not seem to even be interested in what was happening in the south west...we look and are an urban Party” (quoted in Eagle 2015: 20). Clearly, the strategy, under then Labour leader Ed Miliband, that had conflated animal rights with rural policy, had not worked, and it would make sense therefore to change the approach in order to connect with rural voters.

Maria Eagle noted that conflating animal welfare with rural policy caused a ‘disconnection [that] led to false assumptions about the character of these communities’ (Eagle 2015: 20). An activist proved the point when expressing their views on the Labour’s Party’s perception of those who live in the countryside: “They are not all hunting and fishing far from it. Indeed, it is the idea that somehow rural areas are only interested in these issues that does us harm” (quoted in Eagle 2015: 20). The misunderstanding that rural voters were only interested in field

sports and farming, and not their broadband or other pressing community issues, further exacerbated the dichotomy with which the Labour Party approached the countryside. One was either in favour of field sports and farming, and thus voted Conservative, or against, and voted Labour. This approach immediately alienates a significant proportion of the rural electorate that would rather it focused on issues relevant to their everyday lives, such as hospitals, transport and housing (ORB 2019). Furthermore, it signified to Conservative rural voters that it had given up trying to persuade them, as they had already been deemed as unpersuadable.

Rather than seeking to appeal to the rural electorate Labour instead focused on animal rights, as its core “rural” policy. In the run up to the 2015 general election Labour published *Protecting Animals* as a flagship rural document (Labour 2015). However, as Maria Eagle identified, conflating animal welfare/rights policies with rural policy was a mistake: ‘There was a paradox at the heart of the feedback; the *Protecting Animals* document gained most acclaim, but it was regarded as the least relevant to the politics of rural communities’ (Eagle 2015: 18). Such a policy document, intended to appeal to the rural electorate, only appealed to urban Labour voters, reflecting how Labour pursued rural issues from the perspective of the urban electorate. It was policy to the countryside, and not for the countryside, it thus failed to have any resonance in rural areas.

A further reason why Labour failed to engage with the rural electorate was because it did not recognise rural seats as being such. A problem that was so ingrained that even Labour rural voters did not know they were rural. As one activist from Elmet and Rothwell noted: “Quite a lot of people within the constituency would not consider it to be rural in the first place, nor do I believe that the majority of people feel that they have rural issues” and again from Beverley and Holderness: “We didn’t see ourselves as a rural constituency” (quoted in Eagle 2015: 17) These responses highlight that even to rural Labour voters a ‘Labour rural voter’ was an oxymoron, the two simply could not go together. However, this view of rural voters ignores rural issues that Labour needs to focus on to win in these seats. It also allows for the Labour Party itself to ignore rural voters because the rural voters it has are not lobbying, or campaigning, for rural issues.

Ultimately, it leads to this assessment by one activist who observed: “...the attitudes and pronouncements of the Labour Party over the past few decades have often displayed complete disregard for, and woeful ignorance of, the shire counties of this country in which a large proportion of our vital key marginal seats are situated” (quoted in Eagle 2015: 20).

Labour’s still missing rural policy in 2017

Labour’s Rural Problem (2015) laid the groundwork for the Party to address the issues it had with engaging the rural electorate, and potentially to allow the Party to make significant headway for the next election. Ultimately the Party’s electoral rural strategy for the next general election (in 2017) would reveal if Labour valued the countryside, and if the rural electorate understood them to do so.

Labour lost the 2017 general election, winning 262 seats, up from 232, but only 32 of which were rural (16 per cent) whereas the Conservatives won 161 rural seats (81.5 per cent) both therefore remaining around where they had been after the 2015 general election. Labour’s performance in Scotland, although marginally better than in 2015, was still not enough to form a government. The Conservatives did not win a majority either. They did, however, manage to enter a confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic and Unionist Party to stay in No.10, and were able to do so only by winning, once again, the vast majority of seats in the countryside.

Only five of those 28 rural target seats that Maria Eagle identified switched to Labour. Gower, High Peak, Keighly, Stroud and Vale of Clwyd all saw Conservative majorities overturned. However, Labour also lost Copeland, Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, and North East Derbyshire.⁴ The Party’s net gain in the countryside was only two out of the possible 169 seats it did not hold in 2015. It had only increased its number of rural seats from 30 to 32. In 2017 Labour’s electoral strategy worked in urban seats, maximising its support, however Labour failed to make significant gains in rural constituencies. If Labour had won just 2 more rural seats it would have made a Conservative confidence and supply agreement with the DUP impossible, and Labour would have been in government. Labour still had a rural problem, it had failed again to engage sufficiently with the rural electorate. The price was another electoral defeat.

⁴ Corby turned Conservative in a 2016 by-election and has remained Conservative since.

Labour-held rural seats in 2017

Barrow and Furness	Sig rural
Bassetlaw	Rural 50
Bishop Auckland	Rural 75
Blyth Valley	Rural 50
Bolsover	Rural 50
Chorley	Sig rural
City of Durham	Rural 50
Clwyd South	Sig rural
Delyn	Rural 50
Easington	Rural 50
Gower	Sig rural
Hemsworth	Rural 50
High Peak	Rural 50
Keighley	Sig rural
Llanelli	Sig rural
Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	Sig rural
Neath	Sig rural
Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford	Sig rural
North Durham	Rural 50
North West Durham	Rural 75
Ogmore	Rural 50
Pontypridd	Sig rural
Sedgefield	Rural 75
Sefton Central	Sig rural
St. Helens North	Sig rural
Stroud	Sig rural
Vale of Clwyd	Sig rural
Wansbeck	Rural 75
West Lancashire	Rural 50
Wirral West	Rural 50
Workington	Rural 75
Ynys Mon	Rural 75

(BBC. 2017)

In 2017:

- ♦ Labour held 14 of the 56 seats classified as sig rural (25 per cent).
- ♦ Labour held 12 of the 41 seats classified as rural 50 (29 per cent).
- ♦ Labour held 6 of the 75 seats classified as rural 75 (8 per cent).

Figure 5
Possible Labour-held rural seats after the 2019 election

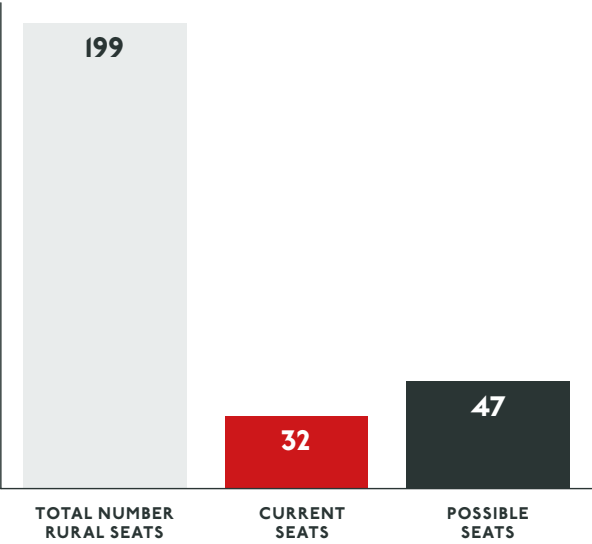


Figure 6
Possible party representation in rural seats after the 2019 election

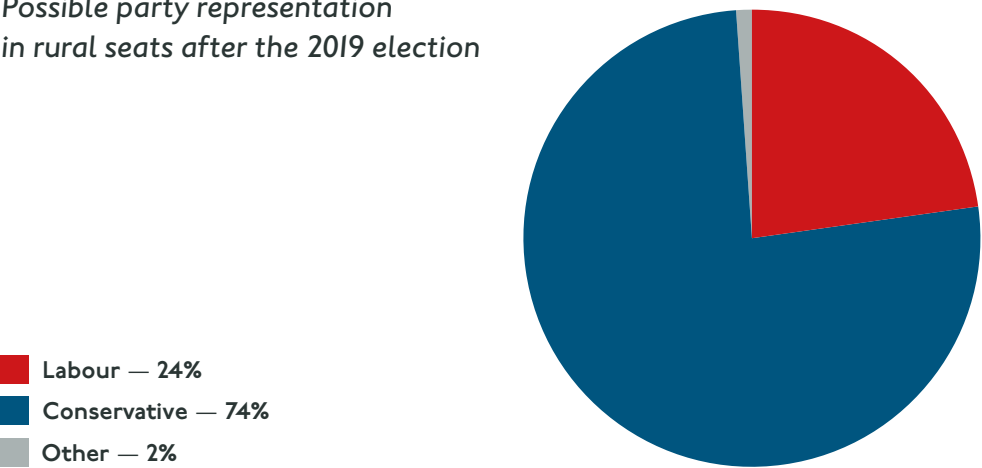
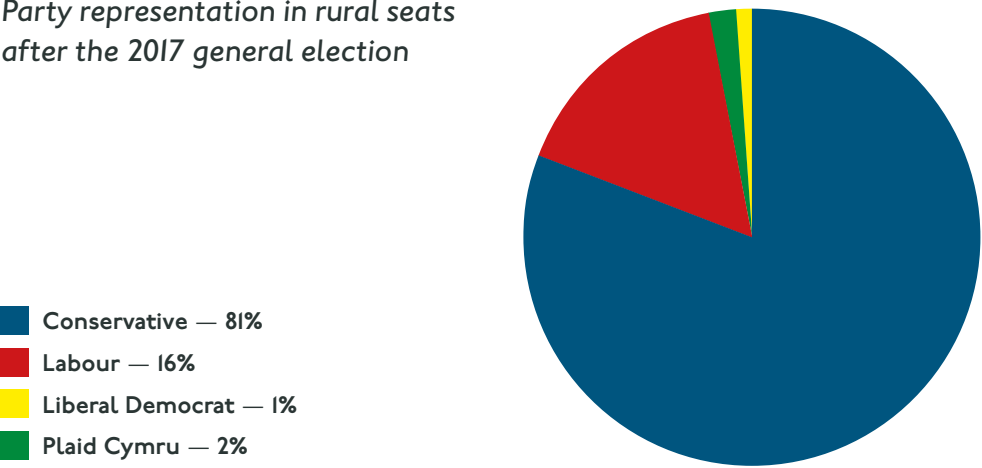


Figure 7
Party representation in rural seats after the 2017 general election



However, many of the target seats identified by Maria Eagle, and indeed many more, were now within reach. Labour’s poor performance with the rural electorate only shows half the picture. Nationally, Labour held 40 per cent of the vote, compared to the Conservative’s 42.3 per cent. The weakness of the Conservative Government meant that each party was gearing up again for another election. It was not expected that the Government could last the full five years. There was therefore huge optimism within Labour that with a final push they could get over the line. If ever there was a time to focus on the rural vote, and reduce the Conservative rural majority, to gain power now would be it.

A Final Push

After the 2017 election Labour needed 64 additional seats, requiring a 3.6 per cent swing nationally, or a 5.9 per cent swing in England and Wales to form a majority government. Out of the 64 seats with the smallest swings to overturn, in England and Wales, 17 were rural.

Labour’s 2019 general election rural target seats

Constituency	Rurality	Required Swing
Aberconwy	Rural 50	1.0
Arfon	Rural 50	0.2
Calder Valley	Sig rural	0.5
Camborne and Redruth	Sig rural	1.7
Carmarthen East and Dinefwr	Rural 75	4.8
Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	Rural 75	3.7
Ceredigion	Rural 75	4.5
Copeland	Rural 75	2.0
Corby	Sig rural	2.3
Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland	Rural 50	1.1
North East Derbyshire	Rural 50	2.9
Preseli Pembrokeshire	Rural 50	0.4
Scarborough and Whitby	Sig rural	3.4
Sherwood	Rural 50	4.9
Truro and Falmouth	Rural 75	3.4
Westmorland and Lonsdale	Rural 75	0.8

(BBC 2017)

The number of rural seats required after the 2017 election represents the national picture, rather than that with the rural electorate specifically. It also masked the rural problem, as Labour seats in Scotland had done before 2015. Figures 5 and 6 highlight, as was the case in the election before, that even with the rural gains needed to win the election, Labour would still trail the Conservatives considerably in rural seats, and as such make the fortunes of Labour dependent on how well it did in cities, not a sustainable strategy to ensure long-term power.

It is important to remember that Labour only held 16 per cent of rural constituencies – the rural problem still existed, as represented in Figure 7. Labour Together’s own analysis concluded that the better than expected result masked the shift away from Labour in its heartlands, that would later turn Conservative later in 2019 (Labour Together 2020: 10). After the 2017 election Labour were not in power and were still struggling to connect with rural voters. The average swing required to overturn in rural constituencies was 15.1 per cent, far greater than the 5.9 per cent swing required in England and Wales. There thus remained a considerable gap between urban and rural constituencies, and much to do to close it. To form the government Labour would have to engage with the countryside to win rural seats.

In 2018 the Fabian Society published *Labour Country* – a further insight into Labour’s relationship with the rural electorate and what the Party needed to do to engage successfully with rural voters.

Labour Country does not differ radically from *Labour’s Rural Problem*. Two years had passed since the publication of Maria Eagle’s report but *Labour Country* found the same issues and came to similar conclusions. Labour was still struggling to engage with rural England and Wales where the Conservatives led Labour by 54 to 31 per cent; in contrast, Labour led the Conservatives by 46 to 37 per cent in urban areas (Phibbs 2018: 6). This is the same disparity as in 2015, and yet in two years little work had been done to address the imbalance. The Fabian Society, however, uncovered something even more alarming than a simple failure to engage:

Rural communities, then, have an aversion to Labour that goes beyond what might be expected on the basis of demographics. The research we carried out for this project suggests that the reason for this underperformance in rural areas is a widespread perception that the political class doesn’t understand or care about rural areas, and that the Labour Party in particular is a Party of the cities, by the cities and for the cities (Phibbs 2018: 6).

The Fabian Society, like Maria Eagle, suggested that in order to breakthrough, the Labour Party not only had to design policies that appealed to rural voters, but also work to change a mindset within the rural electorate. The Fabian Society determined that the rural electorate believed the Labour Party, because of its urban core, viewed them with ‘urban snobbery’ and thought of them as a ‘a bit stupid or thick’, ‘backward’ or ‘country bumpkins’ (Phibbs 2018: 13). This perception has clearly built up after successive Labour administrations have failed to engage with the countryside and not been able to present its policies, or the Party, as able to represent the rural electorate successfully. This view is not helped by a Labour Party that often, as it did under Ed Miliband and continued to do so under Jeremy Corbyn, conflated rural issues with animal welfare, as the Fabian Society concluded: ‘The Labour Party has sometimes given the impression that it believes that rural issues can be reduced to animal welfare issues’ (Phibbs 2018: 15). It is clear, therefore, that Labour must change its approach to rural policy, if it is to engage with the countryside and have any success in gaining a significant number of rural seats in future elections.

Labour’s missed opportunity in the countryside

In the run-up to the 2019 election Labour ignored both Maria Eagle’s and the Fabian Society’s advice. Instead of working to pursue policy for the countryside, it doubled down on animal welfare that often crossed the line into animal rights. The 50-point *Animal Welfare Manifesto* (AWM) became symbolic of how Labour both approached rural policy and viewed those who live in the countryside, and how it confused animal welfare with animal rights.

The *AWM* missed the mark. Aimed predominantly to change the behaviour and practices of those who live and work in the countryside it represented a crude perception of rural communities. The Manifesto directly attacked rural pursuits including hunting and shooting. It wanted to ban hunting again and consult on a ban on grouse shooting. Shooting plays a crucial role in wildlife management and in local rural economies, especially in the winter months when other sources of income from tourism are low.⁵ The *AWM* suggested to rural voters yet again that Labour was out of touch with rural communities.

⁵ Shooting as a whole contributes £2 billion GVA to the UK economy (Oldstead & Moore 2014: 6).

Other policies called for restrictions on game farming, ending the badger cull, designed to tackle bovine tuberculosis in cattle, and expanding the definition of animal to include decapod crustaceans; intended to end the practice of boiling lobsters alive (AWM: I-9). The Manifesto focused on ways to restrict what those in the countryside could do, be it professionally through their business practices, or recreationally through their leisure activities, ingraining the perception that the Labour Party does not understand or represent the countryside. Furthermore, the “anti” agenda, and mischaracterisation of rural life, distracted from some of the positive policies in the Manifesto, and away from the national messages Labour was attempting to promote. In effect Labour’s policy on other aspects relevant to rural life, were drowned out by the *AWM* that, like *Protecting Animals* in 2015, fundamentally missed the mark and in places was a straightforward attack on a significant proportion of rural voters, and in others, simply out of date.⁶

The Manifesto encapsulated Labour’s direction ahead of the 2019 general election. Instead of engaging rural voters and rural stakeholders it went further than perhaps it ever had before in attempting to appeal to its urban voters at the expense of rural ones. Polling from ORB International in 2019, on behalf of the Countryside Alliance, found that less than one in six UK adults viewed animal welfare as an important rural issue. When asked which three issues are the most important for political parties to address, hospitals and healthcare topped the poll at 49 per cent, followed by local transport links, 37 per cent, and affordable housing at 35 per cent (ORB 2019). It was therefore no surprise that the 2019 general election nearly saw Labour wiped out in the countryside as it doubled down on its urban focused election rhetoric.

General Election 2019 rural analysis

Labour’s rural electoral strategy resulted in the Party losing 15 rural seats at the 2019 general election. Despite being so close to victory in 2017, Labour ended with its worst result since 1935. Overall Labour secured 32 per cent of the vote, winning 203 seats, of which only 17 were rural, representing just 8.5 per cent of all rural seats in England and Wales.⁷ In contrast, 177 rural seats (89 per cent) were won by the Conservative Party.

⁶ The AWM’s policy on fly-grazing, despite being a good policy, was already in legislation. The UK Government had supported legislation to tackle fly-grazing 4 years earlier, thus reinforcing the perception that Labour were not on top of the rural brief.

⁷ Chorley was uncontested as it was the Speaker’s, Sir Lindsay Hoyle’s, constituency.

Labour-held rural seats in 2019

Chorley (Speaker)	Sig rural
City of Durham	Rural 50
Easington	Rural 50
Gower	Sig rural
Hemsworth	Rural 50
Llanelli	Sig rural
Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney	Sig rural
Neath	Sig rural
Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford	Sig rural
North Durham	Rural 50
Ogmore	Rural 50
Pontypridd	Sig rural
Sefton Central	Sig rural
St. Helens North Boro Const	Sig rural
Wansbeck	Rural 75
West Lancashire	Rural 50
Wirral West	Rural 50

(BBC 2019)

- Labour hold 9 of the 56 seats classified as sig rural (16 per cent).
- Labour hold of 7 of the 41 seats classified as rural 50 (17 per cent).
- Labour hold 1 of the 75 seats classified as rural 75 (1 per cent).

The results thus followed a similar pattern to that in 2015 so that the more rural the seat the less likely it is to have voted Labour. In fact, Labour lost a percentage share of the vote in every rural seat it held, bar that of the Speaker’s uncontested seat, Chorley, indicating that even in seats it held, the Labour rural message did not connect with voters.

Labour lost all the rural constituencies it gained in 2017 except Gower. Labour did not win any of the 17 rural seats that required a swing of 5.9 per cent or less. The impact of this result was felt even more by once again losing all but one seat in Scotland.

The national swing Labour now need to overturn, following the 2019 general election, is 10.3 per cent, as opposed to 3.6 per cent back in 2017, or more significantly a 12 per cent swing compared to a 5.9 per cent swing in England and Wales. There are 31 rural seats that would become Labour if that swing were to be achieved. However, this means that Labour would only hold 48 of a possible 199 rural constituencies, a little over a quarter of the total. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate just

Figure 8
Party representation in rural seats after the 2019 general election

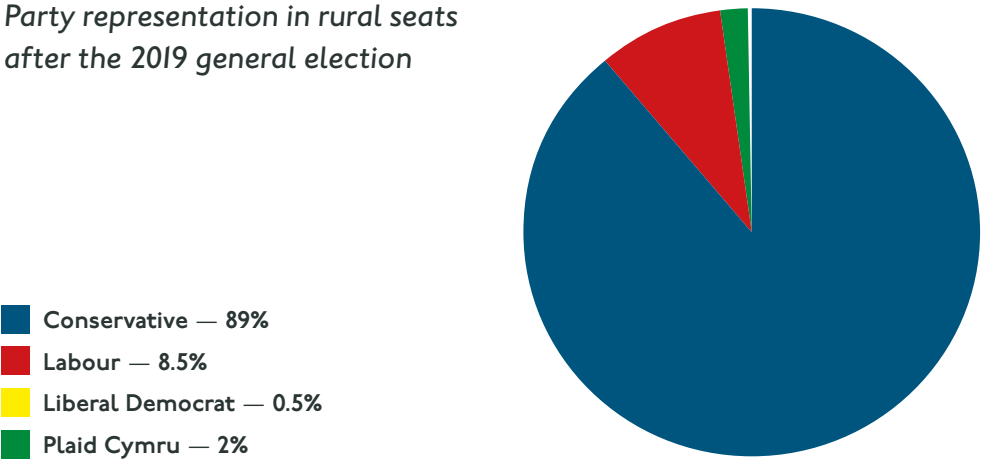


Figure 9
Possible Labour-held rural seats after the 2024 election

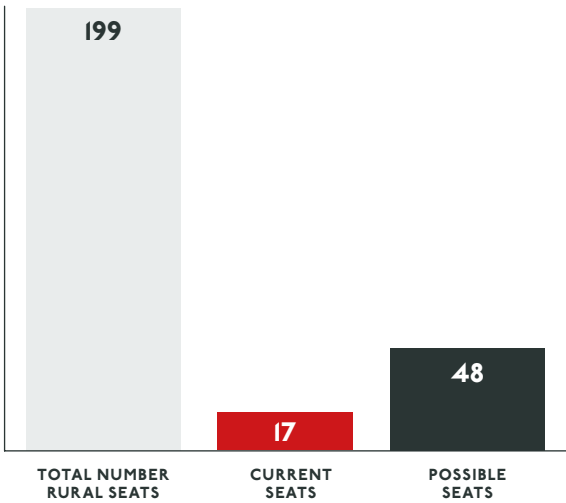
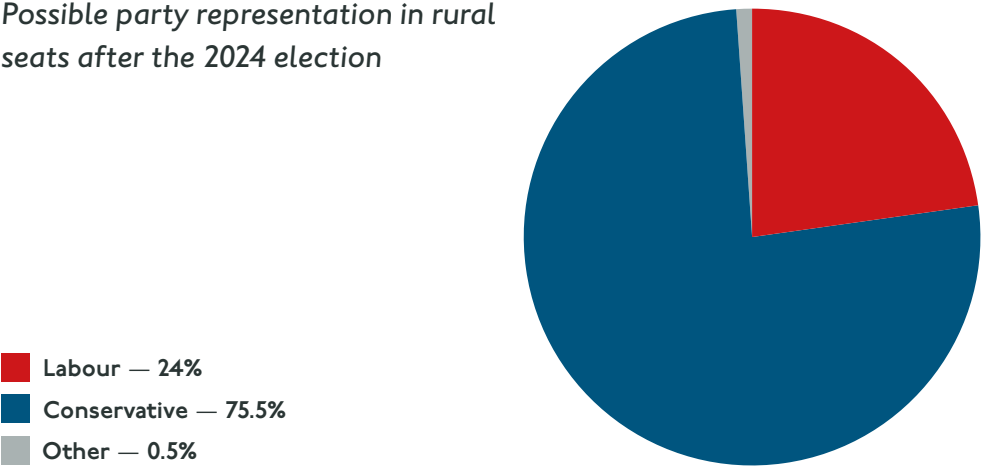


Figure 10
Possible party representation in rural seats after the 2024 election



how few of the 199 rural constituencies are actually currently in play, and how much work there is to do to make up ground in the countryside. Indeed, the average swing required in the countryside is now at its highest at 18.4 per cent, well above the 12 per cent swing Labour now needs in England and Wales to overturn the Government majority at the next election currently due in 2024.

Labour’s 2024 general election rural target seats

Constituency	Rurality	Required Swing
Aberconwy	Rural 50	3.2
Arfon	Rural 50	4.8
Barrow and Furness	Sig rural	6.3
Bishop Auckland	Rural 75	8.9
Blyth Valley	Rural 50	0.9
Bolsover	Rural 50	5.8
Calder Valley	Sig rural	5.0
Camborne and Redruth	Sig rural	8.6
Carmarthen East and Dinefwr	Rural 75	9.0
Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire	Rural 75	9.2
Ceredigion	Rural 75	7.9
Clwyd South	Sig rural	1.7
Copeland	Rural 75	6.9
Corby	Sig rural	8.5
Delyn	Rural 50	1.2
Dwyfor Meirionnydd	Rural 75	8.0
Hexham	Rural 75	11.5
High Peak	Rural 50	0.6
Keighley	Sig rural	2.1
Monmouth	Rural 50	10.0
North West Durham	Rural 75	1.2
Preseli Pembrokeshire	Rural 50	6.0
Rushcliffe	Sig rural	6.3
Scarborough and Whitby	Sig rural	6.9
Sedgefield	Rural 75	5.5
Stroud	Sig rural	2.9
Truro and Falmouth	Rural 75	3.9
Vale of Clwyd	Sig rural	2.5
Workington	Rural 75	5.1
Ynys Mon	Rural 75	2.7
York Outer	Sig rural	9.1

(BBC 2019)

Labour still going in the wrong direction

The facts make it clear that if Labour wishes to be the party of government then it cannot continue to address the rural electorate as it did under Jeremy Corbyn and Ed Miliband. Despite losing 15 rural seats in 2019, including its Shadow Defra Secretary, in the post-election period Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, continued to demonise the rural electorate and pursue an animal rights agenda.

Soon after the election, written questions were tabled by the Opposition on bovine tuberculosis, presumably with the intention to portray badger culls as unnecessary, costly and environmentally damaging (HC Written Questions Feb 2020). Labour MPs then used the Agriculture Bill, the most important piece of legislation for the farming community in 50 years, to attack shooting and hunting. One Labour MP claimed: ‘There is a whole argument to be had about the management of moors for the benefit of grouse, when grouse are imported into this country in their millions just so they can be shot by people on an away-day’. Grouse are, of course wild birds unique to the British Isles. None are imported and this lack of knowledge reinforces the view that the Labour Party is an urban party for urban voters.

Meanwhile, Labour front benchers also attempted to amend the Agriculture Bill so that any farmer who had legally hunted with a dog, using exemptions to control mammals since the introduction of the Hunting Act (2004), would have had their public subsidy removed (HC Deb Feb 27 2020: 257-263). This amendment would have stopped payments to any farmer who had used a dog to catch a rat, a common practice, in the last 15 years. Despite this being pointed out at the time, and the absurd consequences of the amendment accepted by its promoters, it was still pushed to a vote.

Clearly Labour needs a new approach, focused on delivering for the countryside. Labour has always had policies that would benefit rural communities, and is perfectly capable of developing ideas which reflect the real needs and concerns of rural England and Wales, but it must also be prepared to promote them rather than continuing to focus on a divisive agenda. For example, the Labour Manifesto was the only one of the main parties that included rural proofing, but that positive policy was lost in Labour’s rural offer. The 10-point rural policy resource (Figure II) shared by the Shadow Defra team during the election put ‘strengthening the Hunting Act’ as Labour’s second priority and included creating an international crime of ecocide, introducing an animal welfare commissioner and banning the badger cull. Not until

number 9 on the list was there a specific policy aimed at doing something for rural people with a commitment to increasing spending on rural crime.

A commitment to return to hunting and restrict it further, ending the badger cull, introducing an animal welfare commissioner, making ecocide a crime and bringing in a new Clean Air Act did not reflect the priorities in the countryside in 2019. Indeed, in the area of animal welfare the policies Labour promoted to the rural community were the wrong ones. Sheep worrying, a ban on Chinese lanterns and digestible plastics dangerous for livestock and wild animals are far more persuasive policies that actually address animal welfare and would appeal to rural voters (Phibbs 2018: 15). These policies also benefit from being relevant today. The continued obsession with hunting and country sports perpetuates a rural view that Labour rural policy is driven by class-driven ideology. Continuing to pursue such policies, even after the disastrous 2019 election, highlights how little value the Party has placed on these rural constituencies and those that live and worked in them, despite consecutive poor performances in rural seats in general elections this decade.

Figure II
Labour Party general election 2019 social media card



Image: The Labour Party

Labour’s opportunity to re-engage with the countryside

Maria Eagle and the Fabian Society both made clear policy recommendations to rebalance the relationship with the rural electorate. Both suggested policies that focused on growing the rural economy, improving transport, increasing the supply of affordable housing and a post-Brexit agricultural settlement that sustains the countryside.

The 2019 Labour Manifesto references more investment to tackle rural crime and wildlife crime. This is a policy Labour could develop and make a flagship policy. The National Rural Crime Network (NRCN) and the University of Plymouth have reported:

...rural areas, with isolated, sparsely populated areas and limited access to support services, need an appropriate policing approach... [as such a]...review of funding allocations to ensure fair funding for rural forces (Asthana & Gibson 2016: 2).

The report revealed ‘that the demands and impact of rural crime on a dispersed population put it on a par with the challenges of tackling crime amongst dense urban populations... rural communities foot a crime bill of up to £800 million every year, and have only half the confidence in the police’s ability to respond to their needs compared to the nation as a whole’ (Asthana & Gibson 2016: 2). This is a significant problem and has untold consequences for mental health. People in rural areas live daily with the threat of crime and yet believe that there is no support either to investigate it, or prevent it from happening in the first instance.

Labour could also focus on “up-skilling” those in rural areas and protecting its high streets to grow the economy. In short it means investing in places and people. The Government’s focus on developing the “flat white economy”⁸ has meant that investment has been directed to cities like London and Milton Keynes. This in effect has meant rural areas, which were already at a digital disadvantage, find themselves further and further behind due to lack of investment in digital

infrastructure. Continued poor connectivity in rural areas represents a huge missed opportunity for economic development and these gaps and weaknesses need to be addressed. The current lack of broadband infrastructure serving small firms threatens the expansion of the rural economy, currently worth £400 billion annually. Once that infrastructure is installed, it is important that businesses feel confident using new technology and are able to use it effectively to maximise its benefits. An approach that viewed the potential, and the value, of rural and urban areas as equal would go a long way to appeal to rural voters.

Any current discussion of rural policy should also include what agricultural support will replace the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), now we have left the EU. There is still uncertainty as to what public money for public goods will look like. However, it has generally been accepted as a potential improvement on the largely area-based payments under CAP. There has, however, been a temptation to try and tie a new agricultural payment system to things such as rewilding and public access, as happened in the Labour Leadership election (Taylor 2020). The Fabian Society has cautioned against this approach, as it risks being seen as vilifying those who manage the land and once again seems to assume that current land management is either inadequate or harmful. Instead, the Fabian Society recommends working with farmers to achieve improved environmentally sustainable farming practices (Phibbs 2018: 27-28). This has the support of the industry which would favour a new payments system ““that gives the farmer a decent income to provide good quality food that people want, and enhance[s] the environment and the landscape at the same time”” (quoted in Phibbs 2018: 28).

Not only does Labour need to reset its relationship with the countryside, but it also has to reset its relationship with countryside organisations. The Countryside Alliance has long been an effective campaigner in rural areas, and is, perhaps, uniquely placed to understand what the priorities in the countryside are, across a broad range of issues. Contrary to popular political opinion hunting is not a priority with the electorate. ORB International carried out polling in 2019 to find out what issues affect people’s voting intentions. The research, unsurprisingly, revealed that access to hospitals and healthcare, local transport and affordable housing are what really matter. Less than one per cent, when asked, mentioned hunting as a priority (ORB 2019). Yet, the Labour Party has allowed this issue to dominate how they view and how they frame rural issues, and its relationship with the rural electorate and rural organisations. Maria Eagle highlights how effective the Countryside Alliance and the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) are at messaging and how they dominate the rural policy agenda (Eagle 2015: 30). This is no surprise

⁸ “The flat white economy” is used to describe the digital creative economy fueled by a particular type of coffee (McWilliams 2015: 16)

given that they both have large memberships, listen closely to their constituencies and campaign on the issues that are important to them. However, she failed to recognise the need for the Labour Party to engage with those organisations to help to develop and promote Labour’s rural agenda. Maria Eagle viewed both the Countryside Alliance and NFU as rivals and in framing our organisations as adversaries, as the Party also tends to do. This sends a message to rural voters that Labour does not want to work with their organisations on rural issues. For Labour to re-engage with the countryside and rural voters it must engage with rural organisations that campaign on the very issues that matter to rural communities.

It is therefore welcome to see that Labour Together in their post-2019 election review recommend that the Labour Party ‘engage independent organisations, to help ensure [their] manifesto is credible and deliverable’ (Labour Together 2020: 146). The 2019 election made it clear that Labour support is concentrated in cities and not in rural areas. The Party therefore needs help to identify the issues that matter to the rural electorate and take advantage of organisations with significant rural networks. However, for Labour to be able to do that it must recognise that its current rural agenda, and especially its focus on animal rights, does not align with what the rural electorate understand as priorities. It is clear that if it wants to form a government in the future, Labour must be willing to change its approach and focus on the issues that matter to the rural electorate.

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